Research in the Field of Aging and Its Relation to Public Library Services

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IN HIS EXCELLENT doctoral thesis, "The Impact of Gerontological Concepts on Principles of Librarianship,"[1] Elliott Kanner observes that the major research activity in this field took place between the years 1946 and 1961. He attributes the decline in references to aging in the library literature since 1961 to competition with other social groups that use libraries. To be sure, since 1961 there has been a great interest in developing new programs for the illiterate, semiliterate and the "disadvantaged." At the same time there has been a general disregard of the fact that the majority of the old belong in the category of the disadvantaged.

Investigation into library literature and into all writing in the area of gerontology would indicate that Kanner's observation is true not only of libraries, but of social service and academic developments as well. This does not signify that programs and services for older people ceased in the 1960s. They did not; but it is possible to say that they proceeded, with some notable exceptions, on a plateau.

Kanner recognizes, as must all who have any familiarity with the field, that there was a certain exhilaration about early inroads into this territory new for librarians. Much of the early literature is therefore descriptive and endeavors to communicate to the profession the needs of the older population lying unexpressed and unmet. Not until this specialty was recognized by the ALA's Adult Services Division was true investigative and evaluative research done. Implicit in Kanner's thesis is the thought that by now those early articles have become important source material for the present-day researcher.

Truly standing out as a major thrust in the direction of accomplishing this type of research, and taking its place beside Kanner's thesis as a monumental research effort, is the *National Survey of Library Services*

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to the Aging, produced in two phases, and made possible by two separate grants from the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Office of Education, Bureau of Libraries and Educational Technology. Taken together the two studies effectuate the originally stated objective of the survey—to investigate those programs for older people current in 1,300 public libraries in the United States serving populations of 25,000 or more. The survey was confined to the decade between 1961 and 1971. Because of financial constraints, the first phase was limited to certain selected public and institutional libraries in the United States already known to be carrying on special programs for older people.[2] The second phase carried out the original objective of surveying the entire universe as defined in the beginning by those conducting the survey (Booz, Allen and Hamilton, Inc.).[3] Further description of the methodology of the *National Survey* is given in Casey's paper in this issue.

The findings of the survey are important for those planning future library service programs for this group. Its chief significance lies in the fact that it was done at all. First, the making of a research grant to accomplish it is a proclamation that this field of librarianship is considered important and is at the same time a gentle reminder that its development should continue. Also, any review of the past and present is a potential springboard into the future; if the survey can perform that function, it is eminently important. In this connection, the first phase of the survey's conclusions and recommendations merit careful attention; they note that library services to the aging have not developed at a pace consistent with the increase in the number of people in the nation 65 years of age and over, nor at a pace commensurate with the increase in national interest in the needs and problems of the aging. Where those services do exist conspicuously, librarians have been exposed to work for the aging carried on by other disciplines. Kanner makes this same observation, but adds that librarians were open to the implications of what went on in other disciplines and made a creative transfer of philosophy and techniques to librarianship.[4] As Casey points out, the survey urges the strengthening and broadening of research and training programs to familiarize librarians with the needs of the aging and opportunities to serve them.

The second phase of the survey, in which responses from 858 public libraries were tabulated, corroborates the findings of the first phase, and concludes with strong "Overall Observations and Conclusions." The authors summarize their recommendations as follows:

> Services to the aging should be regarded as a distinct program for

purposes of planning, coordination, and evaluation but consist of an aggregation of several services each designed to meet the special needs of the aging.

Federal library legislation should formally recognize the aging as a distinct group of disadvantaged persons and provide funds for program development and professional training.

Organization for the planning, development, and evaluation of library services to the aging should be strengthened at federal, state, and local levels.

The states should give higher priority to library services to the aging.

Programs offering the most service for the lowest unit cost should receive increased emphasis.

Public libraries should insure that opportunities to meet the special needs of aging individuals are investigated and developed.

The use of the aging as paid employees for work with their peers should be substantially expanded.

Further research should be undertaken which builds on the findings and recommendations of this study.[5]

Strong emphasis is given to the need for further research; specific areas for this are recommended, including a study of staff skills needed for effective service to the aging and the aging person's estimate of his own library needs and desires.

Reference has been made to the increase in national interest in the needs and problems of the aging and the library's failure to match its activities to that increase. It is important to realize that much of the interest now focuses (as it always has) upon the physical requirements of the aging: adequate income, proper nutrition, decent housing, available medical care, and most recently, death with dignity. The urgency of intellectual activity on the part of older people gets short shrift.

In geriatrics, a field closely related to gerontology, research into the causes of human aging has been proceeding steadily. In a letter to the director of the International Forum on the Control of Human Aging, held in Zurich, on September 2-5, 1971, L. V. Komarov of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR wrote:

> The main effort now, as I can see, should be directed to achieve the right understanding of the problem and the adequate attitude to it [the prolongation of the life span] as soon as possible. It is necessary to achieve the comprehension of the fact that the prospect of creating effective life-prolonging means against aging and death as its consequences,

> introduces a quite new situation in the life of human society. Natural aging and death, which up till now have been considered to be "normal," common, not subject to Man,—now must be considered as a natural calamity which can and must be fought as resolutely as science and people would fight any other natural calamity killing all without exception.[6]

What Komarov implies with the words "new situation in the life of human society" boggles the mind. Even the comparatively slight increase in life expectancy since 1900 has raised questions and problems which we are trying to solve and which are even now placing a strain upon the society. There are few groups for which the implications are greater than for librarians and other educators.

In 1726, Jonathan Swift foresaw a possibility which he thought might materialize in the distant future. In his bitter satire, *Gulliver's Travels,* he wrote about the country of Laputa. One of Gulliver's side trips from there took him to Luggnagg, and it was here that he encountered the Struldbrugs, or immortals. These were people marked by destiny—to be distinguished by a red mark over the left eyebrow—to live forever. When the voyager first heard of these, he was struck with inexpressible delight, and immediately thought of the many advantages which immortality might confer upon a man. Among them were the possibilities of excelling in learning, of forming and directing the minds of hopeful young men, and, with other Struldbrugs, mutually communicating their observations through the course of time, remarking the several gradations by which corruption steals into the world, and opposing it at every step by giving perpetual warning and instruction to mankind. The voyager's enthusiasm about Struldbrugs was brought to a sharp halt, however when a native Luggnaggian told him that after fourscore years, all had the follies and infirmities of old age, were incapable of learning anything new, could not amuse themselves with reading, could not carry on a conversation, had no curiosity, and were dispised by the rest of the population.

It would be a library's function to combat Struldbrugianism, to which the society has come dangerously close in the stereotypes it has developed concerning the old. Jacob Tuckman and Irving Lorge have made a study of these stereotypes in an important article.[7]

Compulsory retirement at 65 or earlier is leaving thousands of men and women without a role or self-identity and with a sense of failure. Streib and Schneider, in their study *Retirement in American Society* find that "retirees form a greater percentage of the population every year," and hope "the older perspectives on the lifetime virtue of work

may be altered, with new and satisfying roles emerging."[8] This thoroughly researched work points toward the need to intensify library programs with and for older people. These authors tend to favor the controversial theory of disengagement as aging progresses, a theory with which the educator whose philosophy embraces continuing involvement must take issue.

Certainly physical competence, while of interest to the librarian planning or already engaged in a program for older people, is not of prime importance. Obviously mental ability, together with motivation to put it to use, is of such importance.

Determination of the learning ability of adults has been a research target for some time with the name of Edward Thorndike coming immediately to mind. In his book *Adult Learning*,[9] the outstanding finding from extensive research was that from the twenties to the fifties the principal difference between younger and older learners is to be found in the speed of their performance. Even then he discovered that the relative rate of learning declines less than 1 percent from age 25 to approximately 50. At present, it seems strange that Thorndike stopped his investigation at age 50, since we are now thinking in terms of the seventies and eighties. It was no accident that the great burst of energy enlivening the adult education movement in the 1920s coincided with Thorndike's studies not only of learning abilities but also of motivation.[10] However, even then, thoughts of learning in the years beyond 50 were harbored by very few.

In the 1950s there was a geriatrician, Martin Gumpert, who was most instrumental in calling attention to the aging individual as a whole person. He became editor of a magazine, *Lifetime Living*, which was typical of a whole spate of journals which appeared, flourished for a while, and then, with few exceptions, disappeared. In a 1952 editorial entitled "Who is on Our Side?" he stated that the magazine's platform was "to help this nation become aware that life does not end in middle age and that all of us are entitled to be happy, healthy, productive and independent to our last days. This, indeed, creates the great opportunity of our century."[11]

While he lived, Gumpert was the leader in both the gerontological and the geriatric fields. Personally he was a gerontophile, and at age 53 already viewed himself as an older person, and identified completely with the aged. On April 16, 1953, he gave a talk to the Western Reserve University School of Applied Social Science. He called it "Geriatrics and Social Work," although he might just as well have called it "Geriat-

rics and Librarianship." In it he predicted a population of 25,000,000 people over 65 by the end of the twentieth century. (Results of the 1970 census show that he was conservative in this estimate. The total now is 20,065,502, out of a total population of 203,211,926.[12]) Gumpert said, "This unprecedented evolution of old age from an isolated, ill-understood and misplaced group into a mass sector of millions requires indeed a thorough reexamination of all our social and cultural values and an educational effort beyond anything that has ever been tried."[13]

Gumpert received an accolade granted to very few, which demonstrated the strength of interest in this subject in the 1950s: a two-part profile of him entitled "Geriatrician"[14] appeared in the *New Yorker*. In it Gumpert refers to the research into learning abilities conducted by a professor in Holland, C. H. Stratz. That research revealed that our mental capabilities rise sharply from the age of 20 to the age of 40, then rise more slowly. According to Stratz, we reach our mental peak at 60, after which a slow decline sets in, but so slow that an octogenarian's mental capacity is equal to that of a man of 35. Gumpert stands out because he saw so clearly that future research must concentrate on keeping the minds of the aged alert and at the highest degree of efficiency. He gave this a priority equal to that of keeping the physical body in optimum condition.

There are groundbreakers in every movement, and much of the great wave of interest in gerontology may be attributed to Clark Tibbitts and Wilma Donahue who started to work in this field in the early 1940s. Tibbitts' magnum opus is undoubtedly the *Handbook of Social Gerontology: Societal Aspects of Aging*, which he edited and which leaves no aspect of the subject uncovered. In the preface, Tibbitts states, "This *Handbook* represents a first attempt to identify and structure a new field of research and learning—social gerontology."[15]

As Kanner aptly points out, it was the sociologist's definition of this field which had a profound influence on library programs for older people. He writes, "Many of the articles in library periodicals have been written by, or concern the work of librarians who have been leaders in relating the field of gerontology to librarianship. . . . These individuals were in close and direct touch with gerontological developments through conferences, workshops and the institutes they described in their articles."[16]

Bearing out these words, the first article to appear on a public library's educational program for older adults traced the origins of the activity back to a suggestion made by a social worker engaged in ge-

rontological work at the Cleveland Welfare Federation. First given as a paper at the 1948 ALA Convention in Atlantic City, it appeared under the title "Live Long and Like It Club: A Project in Adult Education for Older People."[17] This was a milestone in library development. It introduced the idea of a service to a segment of the population hitherto not considered a special group by librarians. In a broader sense, it stated clearly the theory that attention should be paid to the educational needs of older people as well as to their physical requirements of shelter and food.

When the Adult Education Association of the United States was organized in 1950, it included among its many committees one on Education for the Aging for which Clark Tibbitts served as chairman until 1954. Under its aegis a handbook was compiled by Wilma Donahue, called *Education for Later Maturity*.[18] This, too, is a landmark in the literature on aging, and important as a research tool, not only because of the recognition of the importance of educational programs in plans made with and for the aging, but also because it gathers reports of activities and studies, as well as detailing scientific investigations into learning abilities of the aging written by those who were making the first explorations into this field.

It included a modest section, "Libraries,"[19] which traced the development of special programs for older people in public libraries and which acknowledged again the debt to social work. The public libraries of Cleveland, Boston, Brooklyn, Chicago, Detroit, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, and Oakland were mentioned as having instituted special gerontological programs. The conclusion was that "the seed has already been planted which will grow into the concept of specialized work for the more mature adult as an accepted phase of general library service."[20]

These first excusions into the gerontological field were only the beginning of library interest in this important area. In 1953, Eleanor Phinney wrote an article stating, "the mushrooming of conferences and institutes and the extensive literature on the subject indicate that these problems are being recognized as imperative."[21] Defining the library's responsibility in this area Phinney writes, "The library can become the focal point for information on aging in all its aspects; the librarian is in a position to contribute largely to the re-education of the community in its attitudes toward aging."[22]

The interest of ALA in experimenting in this field was confirmed in 1954 when it distributed funds from a grant made to it by the Fund for Adult Education of the Ford Foundation. The Cleveland Public Library

was awarded $6,000 to conduct a six-month experimental project aimed at developing educational programs with small groups of older people. The project director, Mildred Dorr, reported on the experiment.[23]

In 1957, the Adult Services Division of ALA established its Committee on Library Service to an Aging Population. This committee was a focal point for both past and future activity in its field and for a period it seemed that its concepts had an influence on all of the division's spheres of interest. The committee's work reached a high point in its Institute on Library Service to an Aging Population held in 1959 during the week of ALA's annual conference. The institute represented another landmark in library concern for the older person, and its proceedings were reported in detail by Ruth M. White.[24]

Also in 1957, Eleanor Phinney's article, "Library Service to an Aging Population, Report on a Post Card Survey," marked the beginning of organized research into this field. She states, "The chief purpose of the survey—to gain some idea of the kinds of services being provided and the location of programs which could later be studied and reported in detail—was amply realized."[25] Two years later the sequel, "Trends in Library Services to the Aging" appeared, based on an in-depth study of "how 140 public libraries in the United States are serving older people."[26] These two articles foreshadow the more detailed *National Survey* of 1971-72.[27]

In Appendix B of Elliott Kanner's bibliography there is an exhaustive list of "Library Literature Citations" which covers the field as it was explored and cultivated during the period 1946-61.[28] The list presents an impressive view of the broad influence which this new possibility for service exerted on every phase of work with adults.

The *National Survey of Library Services to the Aging*, 1971 also contains a bibliography.[29] Of a total of 108 citations, 25 refer to material which appeared before 1961, 48 come from library literature produced after 1961, and 35 also dated after 1961 cite works which have to do with social gerontology. Moreover, of that total, 61 appeared between 1967 and 1971, indicating that the years following 1961 continued to be productive.

There seems to be a renascence of interest in library programs for older people as another generation of librarians begins to make its contributions to this specialization. There are indications in the literature being published now that new directions are about to be taken. The Rhode Island Department of State Library Services, for example, is taking a great interest in the development of special programs for older

adults. One of their experiments is described by Jewel Drickamer in an article, "Rhode Island Project: Book Reviews by Older Citizens."[30] This represents an important step in the direction of bringing about active participation of older people in a library program, an objective often mentioned but seldom attained.

Sheer force of numbers of the old and their steadily growing articulateness are making the nation in general more and more aware of its older citizens. As the increase has progressed since the 1940s, the possibility of this group becoming a political force to be reckoned with looms with accelerating immediacy. Such a possibility adds weight to the need for librarians, as well as other educators, to build programs for the old which help to maintain mental resiliency and the ability to think of the welfare of the society as a whole and not only of their own as a segregated and rejected portion of that society. Such programs cannot be created in a vacuum, but need to be based on study of the field of library gerontology for which there is a growing body of resources for research.

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